Information Brief

Safe Schools

Not so long ago, the concept of "safe schools" caused school leaders to concern themselves with school safety patrols, fire and tornado drills, and hall monitors to supervise gum chewing, running, and inappropriate displays of affection. Today, the concerns have changed, and administrators are asking such questions as, "Should we install metal detectors or surveillance cameras in our schools? Do we need a school resource officer? Could it [a school shooting] happen here? How can we protect students from dangerous intruders?" The answers are not simple, but they do exist, in a comprehensive approach to school safety that includes strategies for prevention and early intervention into emerging problem behaviors carried out in collaboration among students, school personnel, parents, and the community.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED:
- *Districts and schools ensure that safe, welcoming, accessible physical environments, inviting and conducive to learning, are provided.*
- *The school is a caring, respectful, encouraging community.*
- *The school has a variety of programs and services intended to prevent or intervene early with students' social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties.*
- *The school, in collaboration with the community, provides a full and accessible array of specialized programs and services to address the needs of students experiencing social, emotional and/or behavioral problems.*

INTRODUCTION

The issue of general school safety has taken on new importance over the past decade as we witnessed the tragic acts of violence committed by and toward children in the school environment. Today more than ever, we see a need to develop safe, disciplined school surroundings, free from the damaging effects of drugs and violence.

Along with studying the effects of tragedy on school safety over the past few years, we must note that school crime continues to decline nationally, down nearly one-third between 1992 and 1998. It is encouraging to know that the number of students who reported carrying a weapon to school in 1999 was down 5 percent from 1993 (*The Safety Zone,* Fall 2000).

Violence among youth has its origin in society at large. School districts should address the root causes of violence through education and forge partnerships with the community to create safe learning environments for all children.

SAFE SCHOOLS DESCRIBED

What characterizes a safe school?

Thriving schools foster learning in a safe environment where behaviors are socially appropriate. Academic achievement is a strong focus. Schools nurture positive relationships between students and staff. A safe school has the involvement of parents and the community at large. Safe schools are well prepared with plans for prevention, intervention and crisis response.

Can early warning signs help in the identification of a troubled child?

When viewed in context, early warning signs can signal a troubled child. It is the responsibility of the school staff, parents and others working with youth to see to it that misinterpretation of these signals does not cause undue stereotyping of students. The warning signs should be used to help identify student needs and to intervene appropriately. Some signs include:

- *Withdrawal from social contact* that often stems from feelings of depression, rejection, persecution, unworthiness and lack of confidence.
- *Feelings of isolation and loneliness,* though they do not always result in violent behavior. These feelings may be indicators that the child has internal issues that hinder development of social affiliations.
- *Feelings of rejection* that are experienced by many adolescents and can be emotionally painful. A troubled child may respond to rejection in negative ways, which may include violence.
- *Being a victim of violence* at or away from school, which may cause the student to become violent.
- *Feeling picked on or persecuted,* which may cause a troubled student to withdraw socially. If this child is not given the tools with which to address these feelings, he or she may vent them in inappropriate ways.

How do I get help for a troubled child?

Prevention approaches are effective in decreasing the number of behavior problems in the school community. But prevention alone can't eliminate the problems of all children. Approximately 5 - 10 percent of students will

need more intensive interventions to decrease their high-risk behaviors (*Early Warning, Timely Response — A Guide to Safe Schools,* August 1998).   The following steps lead to effective practices for improving the behavior of a troubled child:

- *Establish a partnership with the child, school, home and community.* Effective schools can be the coordinating partner to collaborate with child and family service agencies, law enforcement and juvenile justice systems.

- *Inform parents and get them involved as soon as possible when early warning signs are observed.* Inform parents of your school discipline policies and about their child's behavior at school — both good behavior and bad. Parents need to know how they can support the school's efforts with their child.

- *Provide the entire school community — teachers, students, parents and support staff — with training in response to imminent warning signs.* When faced with a potentially violent student, many school staff members are afraid that they may do or say the wrong thing.

- *Encourage students to be responsible for their own actions and support their efforts.* Involve students in planning and implementing violence prevention in your school.

- *Put the resources available in your school to good use.* School-based programs and staff can be valuable assets in your pursuit of a safe school environment. Programs such as special education, safe and drug-free school programs, pupil services and Title 1 provide the necessary components for effective school safety.

What can we do to develop and implement plans for dealing with violence in school and for improving general school safety?

Services, Strategies and Suggested Training:

- Focus on the academic achievement of all students in the school community.
- Involve families and the community by making them feel welcome and necessary to the well being of the school.
- Discuss safety issues in a way that teaches children about the dangers of violence and offers appropriate alternatives for dealing with difficult feelings.
- Design and implement effective school discipline policy and a system for analyzing violent incidents in your school.
- Provide ongoing training and support for all school staff in violence prevention, intervention and crisis response.
- Offer extended-day programs that provide a variety of services such as counseling, tutoring, creative outlets and help with homework.
- Use alternative school settings for students exhibiting violent behavior and students that bring weapons to school.
- Redesign parts of the school facility to eliminate dark, secluded and unsupervised areas.

SUMMARY

School administrators now have to face the fact that a violent situation will occur in their district at some time, and they need to be prepared with intervention procedures. Although crime in schools is on the decline, crises involving sudden violence in schools are traumatic because they are so unexpected.

The safety of our schools has to take priority in order to generate the setting in which students can flourish both academically and socially. It takes the cooperation of parents, schools, and community leaders to produce and implement plans to end the violence and create a safe and nurturing school environment.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:
- **Web sites:**
  - U.S. Department of Education, Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program: http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS/
  - National Resource Center for Safe Schools: http://www.safetyzone.org/
  - National School Safety Center: http://www.nssc1.org/
  - U.S. Department of Education: www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywrn.html
  - National Association of Attorney Generals and National School Board Association joint Web site: www.keepschoolssafe.org
  - National Governors Association Center for Best Practices: www.nga.org
  - National Campaign Against Youth Violence: http://www.noviolence.net/
  - The Safe Schools Coalition of Washington: http://www.safeschools-wa.org/
  - Keep Schools Safe: http://www.keepschoolssafe.org/
- **In this Handbook:** See additional briefs in this section on *Environmental Design, A Continuum of Programs and Services, School-Wide Discipline, Risk-Focused Prevention, Early Intervention,* and *Wrap Around.* In other sections of the manual, please refer to *Early Warning, Timely Response, Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide*, and "*Success4's* Critical Elements." For information beyond the scope of this handbook, see the Resources Section.